CHAPTER 2

The Vision Instinct

The challenge to understanding the viability of visual truth—and, therefore, photojournalism—is twofold: (a) to examine its role in human life, and (b) to examine its relation—if any—to the real. As with many contemporary human activities, we can easily conceive of possible origins of photojournalism in a complex array of human needs and characteristics that can be traced to survival and expressive behaviors of early humans. Articulating why photographs have evidentiary power in today's multimedia world is more difficult. This chapter highlights issues that confound attempts to comprehend the seemingly unique authority of a photographic image. The discussion draws on surveillance and visual perception theories to locate visual reportage within a larger realm of human visual behavior.

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CHAPTER 2

The Vision Instinct

The story of photojournalism begins at different points in history, depending on which book of history is read. A 1950 book published by the National Press Photographers Association goes back 25,000 years to artists who "painted pictures on cave walls—and thereby told men of today something about the prehistoric world" (p. 8). In the same book, *The Complete Book of Press Photography*, Soule described other early works of "pictures that tell stories," including a four-picture sequence of bas-reliefs carved in 3000 BC (p. 8). Kobre (1994) opened the history chapter of his classic text, *Photojournalism, The Professional Approach*, with a vivid account of a 19th-century news photographer who shot what was then an unusual amount of imagery—12 exposures—of a fire, despite technical and physical difficulty of working with a 5 × 7 view camera. The photographer then developed his pictures, made contact prints, and handed them to an artist. The artist used the pictures to make drawings (often "improving" the picture with variations)—which in turn would be used to make zinc engravings so the *New York Graphic News* could run visuals on its April 16, 1887, front page.

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Historian Michael Carlebach (1992) traced U.S. photojournalism to a time shortly after Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre announced his process in 1839. One editor wrote in 1846 that daguerreotypists were already on to news photography:

> A man cannot make a proposal or a lady decline one—a steam boiler cannot explode, or an ambitious river overflow its banks—a gardener cannot elope with an heiress, or a reverend bishop commit an indiscretion, but straightway, an officious daguerreotype will proclaim the whole affair to the world. ("Picture Pausings," cited in Carlebach, p. 2)

Some attribute the development of visual reportage to technology, some to developments in art, some to the economics of capitalism, some to ideology, some to the half-tone process or the hand-held camera, and some to the origins of human behavior.

Although each factor has contributed to the development of media, I favor the argument that the cultural practice of photojournalism grew out of the human tendencies to survey the environment visually as a matter of survival and curiosity, to better understand the environment, to facilitate memory, and to observe others as a means of social control.

The roots of photojournalism tap deeply into the multifaceted psyche of human beings and the cultures and societies they create in the process of living. From the standpoint of early humans, visual reportage was part of an intuitive and rational surveillance system that determined who would live and who would die. From the standpoint of Aristotle, watching a solar eclipse through tiny holes in a leaf was part of a rational system of discovery, insight, and supposition about the nature of optics and representation. From the standpoint of Foucault (1973, 1977), analyzing the panoptic structure of contemporary society was part of a passionate challenge to the oppressiveness of dominant institutions. From the standpoint of a subject of photojournalism, being photographed can be an invasive experience—or an opportunity to communicate with the world.

Photojournalism is pegged as a paparazzi-like profession of voyeurs—or as an essential part of the Fourth Estate's checks and balances on government and industry. Photojournalism can be viewed as guardian of the real—or as a set of codes and practices prescribed by culture. Some theorists argue that photojournalism is part of the dominant group's way of controlling the masses and of commodifiying life. Word journalists often dismiss photojournalism as illustration, as something to break up the gray space of their words. Yet many visual journalists consider their profession a calling to

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witness and to record what the world cannot as one way of moving toward a more just global community. And viewers see it either as truth or lies—or they refuse to "see" pictures they do not want to see. How did this contradictory mass of perspectives about visual reportage emerge? How did photojournalism come to be? How did pictures of war victims, of starving and ill children, of political protests and the catch of the day became part of the everyday visual environment?

HUMAN VISUAL BEHAVIOR

When we think about how the contemporary practice of photojournalism came about, we have to broaden our understanding of photojournalism within the context of larger issues of human behavior, particularly human visual behavior. Human visual behavior refers to all the ways human beings use seeing and images in everyday life. For sighted persons, that includes the navigational seeing that enables them to move their bodies safely and purposefully through the physical world, or using the "mind's eye" to imagine what a house might look like when it's finished, or even the process of dreaming while asleep. For nonsighted persons, it may mean using the mind's eye to construct a system of forms and patterns that enable them to navigate the world without physical sight.

Gesture expert Jürgen Streeck (personal communication, 1994) suggested the term *human visual behavior* to replace *nonverbal behavior*, arguing that the former shifts attention to action that can be observed rather than to action in negative relation to words. As a major component of human communication, visual behavior constitutes the core focus of visual journalism and social science and of a great deal of human interaction. Here, we should distinguish between the terms *behavior* and *communication*. *Behavior* typically refers to observable evidence of activity, whereas communication refers to shared meaning. I argue, however, that they are one and the same. *Visual behavior*, as I use the term here, refers to nonverbal activity. That activity can be external or internal, meaning that people can observe something outside of themselves, such as someone else or a photograph, as well as engage in interior visual activity, such as imagining or dreaming, that is not observable to others. Visual behavior includes how people act in front of cameras, as well as behind them. It includes seeing of every kind: looking at photographs, watching a sunset, noting the way a cat slowly stalks a bird, absorbing the beauty of a sleeping child, scanning the galaxy for changes through a telescope. It includes witnessing the enactment of countless

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deaths in *Die Hard II*, watching in mesmerized numbness the real-time bombing of a city via a medium that is more often about make believe, consumerism, and entertainment than about attempts to convey truth. It includes police mug shots, family albums, roadside billboards, and Internet zines. It includes all the ways people use these various visual artifacts, both consciously and subconsciously. It includes the ways people pose, mask their intimate personalities, project false personae, take on roles in order to manipulate opinion, model clothing, and unconsciously reveal that they are lying. It includes an editor's decision to use one photograph over another, a judge's decision to forbid cameras in the courtroom, a school board's decision to use video cameras on school buses, the military's decision to use a satellite to spy on another country. It includes an artist's decision to use bright red and yellow acrylic paints, a teenager's decision to sport purple hair, or an aging person's decision not to color graying hair.

And what do all of these seemingly disparate actions have to do with photojournalism? On one side of the continuum, they affect the content of photojournalistic imagery as visual forms of human behavior. On the other side, photojournalism affects those same actions; its content becomes part of the visual dialectic of human life.

Does this mean that human beings have a vision instinct, similar to the sucking instinct of newborns? Consider dictionary definitions, which I have found to be remarkably lucid starting points for discussions of concepts on which tomes have been written. *Vision* means sensing with the eyes, sight; foresight; "something seen in or as if in a dream or trance ... or the experience of such a perception"; "a vivid, imaginative scene conception," an object of sight;" a scene, person of extraordinary beauty (*Random House Webster's*, 1995, pp. 1489–1490). So *vision* can be both "seer" and "seen." Instinct is "an inborn pattern of activity or ... action common to a given biological species," "a natural or innate impulse, inclination or tendency," "a natural aptitude or gift," "natural intuitive power" (p. 698). And intuition? Intuition means "direct perception of truth, fact, etc., independent of any reasoning process; immediate apprehension," a "keen and quick insight" (p. 709).

The primary application to the discussion of photojournalism is that recording or transcribing what one sees is a longstanding behavior for human beings. We have moved from cave drawings to hieroglyphs to woodcuts to paintings to photography, and, interestingly, our sense of portraying the "real world" has shifted as we have learned to use different media. Galassi (1981) suggested that photography was invented because of our desire to represent things outside of ourselves realistically. The problem

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is that what appears to us as visually realistic changes through time and culture (Gombrich, 1961; Gombrich, Hochberg, & Black, 1972). Consider Giotto's invention of perspective in the early 14th century (Shlain, 1991, p. 48). Perspective is a technique painters can use to make objects they paint appear to recede in the distance, thereby creating the illusion of a third dimension in a two-dimensional space. Photography has been the most significant means of recording in the 20th century, and photographers learn to control perspective in order to avoid the uncomfortable, apparent distortions that occur when light reflected from different points is passed through a lens to be recorded on a light-sensitive surface. Yet, since the invention of photography, we have also invented movies, three-dimensional images, and virtual reality. Does any one form communicate better than the others, or does each simply communicate in its own ways?

The critical point for photojournalism may be Bazin's (1967) observation that a photograph is a trace of what was. And by holding that trace, a photograph appears to hold a close relation to the real. This correspondence between subject and image led to our placing great faith in the truth-telling capacity of photographs, being the closest things we had yet invented to a non-mind's-eye-created picture. We now know that photographs, too, result from conventions of seeing, framing, point of view, memory, and so forth, and further, that reading them, interpreting their content appropriately, can be just as culture specific as viewing a painting. So why do photojournalism?

SURVIVAL AND EXPRESSION

The larger questions driving this discussion can best be understood by beginning with *surveillance* and *visual perception* theories as rationales behind the development of visual reportage and its relation to our interpretation of the world around us. Recent developments in surveillance and visual perception theory offer significant clues regarding the development of photojournalism. Both tie visual reportage to survival and to the visual processing tendencies and abilities of the human brain (i.e., curiosity, voyeurism, imagination, memory, dreams, visualizing). Surveillance and visual perception theories have extended the understanding of how human beings operate beyond abstract concepts of mind by looking deeply within the psychological and physiological makeup of the human creature. Both surveillance and visual perception theory take us back to the early history of humankind, focusing attention on biological determinants of the importance of vision in human survival.

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Both theories continue to mature as science and art move closer to uniting in their contest to understand how people relate to the world. Recent developments, such as explorations of the link between visual perception and consciousness (Crick, 1994), between biological determinism and news (Shoemaker, 1996), between brain processes and knowledge (Bechara, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1997), urge a redefinition of what it means *to see*. In addition, such mid-20th century theories as social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, together with late-20th-century postmodern theory, both challenge and inform earlier notions of reality. I draw on a few of these other ideas throughout this book.

The following section traces the larger issues underlying the development of visual reportage as it is known today. Note that each theoretical area summarized here is far more complex than space allows for a detailed discussion. However, the core tenets underlying each theoretical strain profoundly inform our analysis of photojournalism.

Surveillance Theory

A few years ago, my husband, a friend, and I hiked up a small site near Albuquerque, intent on viewing Anasazi rock drawings. The site was well traveled, hardly a wilderness discovery. Yet it retained a sense of those who had walked there centuries before, their presence preserved and communicated through their drawings. As we climbed the proverbial beaten path of tourists, guided by occasional 20th-century signs put there by the U.S. Park Service, I could not help but take my mind's eye back through time, into the space in which the drawings were made. It occurred to me that we were walking through an old-world form of reportage. The symbols and figures clearly communicated something to those who spoke the vernacular of the time—informing, leading, guiding, warning, protecting, stimulating (Schramm, 1988).

Schele and Friedel (1990) wrote of feeling similarly in their book, *The Forest of Kings*, in which they unraveled the culture of the Maya via what is left of their art and architecture:

> The connections the Maya put into their public history between things spiritual and things human, between things ancestral and things current, between things of the king and things of the community, were not a matter of accident or personal taste. The Maya put them in the public forum of life because they were the things they saw as important. The inscriptions and imagery we have are the propaganda the kings thought their people would

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believe. They represent the strategies everyone thought gave them a chance to live beyond dying (p. 63)

Following Lasswell's (1948) theory of the surveillance function of communication, Shoemaker (1996) argued that human beings are hard-wired for news. It is in our physical interest to stay informed. And it is easy to envision ancient humans keenly scanning areas around them for predators or human enemies, and perhaps leaving a visual sign to mark a spot or to warn others. Although interpretations of the purposes and meanings of ancient symbols left on the earth continue to change as cultural theories and historical information change, one thing remains unchanged: People have been making visual records and expressing themselves visually for a very long time. These ancient records may seem far removed from contemporary photojournalism. But think ahead for a moment, to the year 5000. How will people living in the 51st century interpret the signs and symbols we have left behind? Chances are we will be viewed as primitive humans moving through early stages of a technological revolution. Our newspapers and magazines, if any semblance of them survives 3,000 years, will be treasured two-dimensional artifacts of earlier, primitive times on earth. Our rituals, our survival stories, our images of clothing and commodities, will be viewed holistically as parts of culture, not as separated images of news and advertising. Still photography may be collapsed in historical time lines with painting and drawing by hand (whether on rocks or canvas). Photojournalism may be viewed as a primary surveillance tool of 20th-century life, a time when humans actually sent other humans into war zones and hurricanes, into private living spaces and public arenas to make visual records for the rest of the world to see. Photojournalists may no longer be needed; instead, society will rely on a panoptic array of mechanical eyes capable of seeing and recording every movement in our galaxy. Farfetched? Perhaps. But remember: Only 200 years ago humans could not make an exact copy of anything or anyone in the world. Photography had not been invented; nor had journalism. At the very least, surviving images of reportage will provide a map of the 20th century—as Schele and Friedel wrote about the Maya, "These texts and images are a map of the ancient Maya mind and history, of the world as they understood it" (p. 63).

Human abilities to observe and make images have come a long way since ancient times. Consider, for example, a recent newspaper article about computer vision research that may lead to the "ultimate security system" ("UT Engineer," 1998, p. B1). In the article, engineer Jake Aggarwal described his vision of an airport equipped with a computer-video system that can track

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every person's move to the point of knowing when "something is amiss" (p. 1). As Lyon (1994) clearly articulated in his book *The Electronic Eye*, late-20th-century technological developments can be interpreted positively and negatively. Although surveillance systems can invade and control, they also can protect and illuminate. When examining contemporary photojournalism, we must consider both ends of the continuum as well. Photojournalism can invade the privacy of individuals and control social behavior via stereotyping and carrying out the hegemonic impulses of such institutions as government, corporations, and cultural practices—and it can protect by exposing social problems and errant behaviors.

Tagg (1988) suggested that still photography's role in social control was clear from the beginning. Consider his chapter on 19th-century photographic records of such criminals as the child who was arrested and beaten for stealing a piece of bread. It seems that we are now only one step removed from that time. Rather than gather in the town square to stare at someone being publicly flogged, we now watch a symbolic flogging carried out by our emissaries, the press. Recall coverage of the teenage parents who killed their newborn and dumped him in a trash can rather than be found out. The ritual of public persecution via the media is less brutal than 19th-century humiliations only in terms of physical pain. The main differences are the extent of public knowledge of their actions and the extent of public memory about their actions.

Now consider the issue from another perspective. Jean-Marc Bouju and his Associated Press colleagues won a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the Rwandan massacres. Without their passionate determination to visually record the horrors of genocide in practice, the rest of the world might never have known of, much less seen, the events. Because we know, we are reminded of humankind's abilities to commit atrocious acts on other humans. We may try to improve the world as a result of seeing visual evidence. Is such an approach nothing more than neo-romantic idealism? Or do the photos harden us further?

In *The Power of Photography*, Goldberg (1991) presented 279 pages of evidence that photographs "have been altering people's minds and rearranging their lives for a long time" (p. 7). Among the examples Goldberg cited are photographs of emaciated Union prisoners held in Confederate camps. Publication of reproductions of the images "taken from life" sparked public furor and an 1865 congressional effort to legislate retaliation. Labeled propaganda by the South, four of the photographs were used as evidence leading to the hanging of the commander of one prison camp.

Jumping into the 20th century, Goldberg noted that when written reports from eyewitnesses of atrocities in Nazi concentration campus first

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were published, readers were skeptical. "It wasn't until the newspapers published pictures of the camps, usually on the inside pages, that these images forced people to accept the enormity of the Nazi war crimes" (p. 33).

Goldberg concluded her book with a 1989 photograph of a man standing in front of a tank during student demonstrations in Beijing, "risking his life to stop the advance of all that armor." In the West, the image meant "individual courage standing firm before the armed might of the state." In Chinese exhibitions, the picture shows "the restraint of the troops, who chose not to run over a lone man blocking the march of an entire line of tanks." Goldberg maintained that in each case, the photograph told its story "faithfully and honestly ... for photographs do not give us truth—we give truth to them" (pp. 250–251).

Therein lies the issue: Is there such an entity as "visual truth" beyond what we want to see and believe? A good place to begin answering that question is *visual perception theory*.

Visual Perception Theory

Perception is the psychological and physiological response of a person to a stimulus (Denton, 1994). Visual perception is a person's response via visual means. For purposes here, a *visual stimulus* is a phenomenon with observable characteristics. A chair, for example, is a visual stimulus in the sense that when one sees a chair, it triggers a mental pattern associated with sitting down. If the chair is a particular kind of chair—say, a velvet, overstuffed recliner—seeing it might trigger mental pictures of a close family member lying back for long periods of time in such a chair. Any psychological response we have—say, nostalgic feelings of home—to the chair might then be related to how we feel about the color blue or about the family member. Our physiological response might also relate to the color blue—does it make us calm down—or to the idea of sitting down—relief to be off our feet—or to the family member—do we recall dad asleep after dinner and feel a rush of warmth about snuggling up with dad in the big chair when we were children? As one can quickly tell, psychology and physiology are so intricately linked that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate them.

We do not have space in this book to delineate the intricacies of visual perceptual theory, if indeed they can be outlined. Nobel laureate Francis Crick (1994) used an entire book to explain his theory that what we know as the human soul is actually linked to visual perception in that we are nothing more than neurons firing in response to various stimuli. However, we can outline a few principles of visual perception theory that inform our

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understanding of how photojournalism came about. According to current research, visual perception:

- Depends on biology and culture.
  - Some universals:
    - Sexual response.
    - Self-protection.
    - Aggression.
    - Friendliness.
  - Many culture-and time-bound responses:
    - Purple in U.S. versus purple in another country.
    - Red as passion—in love or war.
    - Picture of starving child:
      - In past—moving.
      - Now—cliché.
    - Landscape:
      - Forest—closed in or safe.
      - Plains—free or vulnerable.
- Affects our attention and arousal.
  - Communicates quickly and powerfully.
  - Engenders a range of responses.
- Appears to be closely linked with memory.
  - Involves both brain hemispheres.
  - Right-brain hemisphere is more often associated with visual.
  - Visual stimulus can shortcut memory.
  - Visual is more closely linked with memory than words:
    - Storage.
    - Retrieval.
- Affects the way we understand ourselves, others, and the world.
  - Getting to know ourselves via external images of ourselves is one way to improve self-concept.
  - If the images we see are stereotypical, we are more likely to see a stereotyped world.
- Affects the way we act.
  - If the images we see are violent, we are more likely to become violent.
  - If the images we see are persuasive, we are more likely to act as the image creators intended.
  - If the images we see are one-sided, we are more likely to see and to remember that side.

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Visual perception theory underscores the idea that even when we know cognitively that something we see cannot be true, or have been told that it is not true, we still tend to believe what we see (Gregory, 1970). Research in visual information processing indicates neurophysiological bases for the "seeing-is-believing" phenomenon. As Gregory noted, "Though visual perception involves problem-solving, evidently it does not follow that when we know the solution intellectually we will necessarily see it correctly" (p. 56). One recent study of reader credibility in news photographs supports applying this idea to news work. Kelly and Nace (1994) found that although readers rated *The New York Times* more believable than the *National Enquirer*, they rated "the photos in the *National Enquirer* as more believable than was the newspaper in general" (p. 18).

Compounding the problem is the ease with which we read visual information. Potter, Bolls, and Dent (1997) cited new empirical evidence, as well as previous studies, that "visual encoding is relatively automatic and cognitively cost-free" to the point that they suggest television producers "rely more on visual information [than text] to deliver their themes" (p. 12). It is reasonable to apply such evidence to still photography by theorizing that such "relatively automatic" visual encoding of published photographs occurs daily in the hurried review of news. For example, we may perceive a page-one photograph of President Clinton saluting troops in Bosnia as true in spirit as well as letter—even though, if we stopped to analyze the photo for a few moments, we might wonder if the situation were more one of a carefully constructed photo opportunity than an occurrence that would have taken place had cameras not been present.

The problem also may be in part cultural. Barry (1997a) maintained that because "we have become accustomed to believing that photographs don't lie," we still have a "'seeing is believing' attitude." She suggested that "advances in technology have given commercial and political interests the ability to manipulate the way we see and comprehend our world before our understanding of visual technology and the psychology of the visual image has fully matured" (p. 22).

Social scientists use frame analysis to study how humans organize our experiences and subjective involvement in social events (Goffman, 1974). A "frame" refers to basic elements that organize an experience (pp. 11–13). Photojournalists, for example, typically work in an "eyewitness" role: Their job is to observe, to record what they observe and to report it to those who were not at the scene, to serve as "eyewitnesses" for the world. Traditionally in photojournalism, this frame has been based on

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at least two assumptions: that the photojournalist "sees" accurately, fairly, and objectively, and that the photographer has both the right and the responsibility to do what is necessary to get the picture for the world to see. As a result, photojournalists often say they do not manipulate reality, that they just "take what's out there in front of the lens." For example, a photojournalist covering a fire is not allowed to direct a firefighter to splash water over his or her head, even though the firefighter might have done so on his or her own eventually. Ideally, if something did not happen in front of the camera without the photographer's intervention, it is not considered visually "true."

SUMMARY

By integrating theoretical approaches, we can better understand how the neurophysiological tendency to believe what we see, combined with such cultural frames as the eyewitness and objectivity imperatives of the 20th century, have led us to draw heavily on media imagery, particulary news imagery. Furthermore, our biological surveillance system insists that we constantly scan our environments, searching for threats to life and livelihood. During the 20th century, we created a practice, photojournalism, to do the scanning that was no longer possible for us to do individually due to the ever-growing expanse and density of the area that had to be watched. And for a while we thought we could believe the images produced by that practice as transparent, authentic records for us to witness vicariously. Twentieth-century technological development slowly taught us how limited even the camera eye is, leading us to question realistic-appearing images. We began to question not only the nature of reality but also the means by which we come to know. It is no wonder postmodern humans have suffered from feelings of disintegration. The primary tool we have used for millennia, our eyes—extended now by the camera—can no longer be trusted to give us reliable information. Our need to survey the environment for our own survival conflicts with our relatively new cognition that things are not always what they seem.

Is it possible that photojournalism can do what it purports to do: visually report the happenings of the world with some level of truth? Yes and no. The fact that all knowledge has limitations can be true, and good photojournalism also can be reasonably true. As with any human endeavor, photojournalism is both behavior and cultural practice constructed over time as a result of a variety of human tendencies and needs.

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The roots of photojournalism can be traced to the beginning of humankind—to that time when seeing clearly could literally mean the difference between life and death. It is hardly curious that we have grown into a society of voyeurs … with so many eyes on us and available to us, our internal organisms must feel in constant danger, and even go numb with the overwhelming number of only-too-real-appearing dangers we see daily via the media. But what is the alternative—not to look? Given that we appear to be hard-wired to look, perhaps we should learn to look with increased understanding of the significance of photojournalism as a form of visual behavior in our lives. Perhaps we can learn to use the vision instinct in conscious ways to help us advance as a species.

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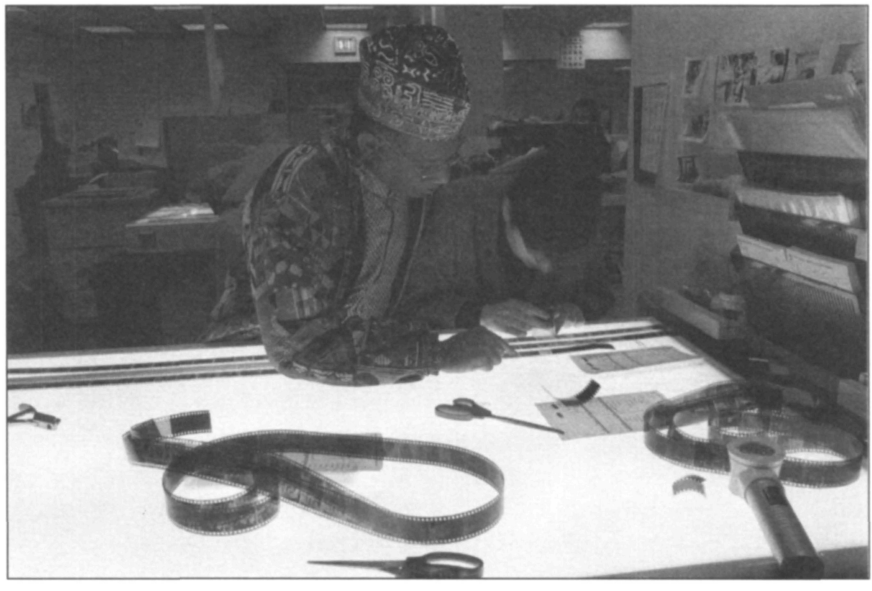

A 20TH-CENTURY ROUTINE. Nancy Lee, right, picture editor for *The New York Times*, and staff photographer Chester Higgins, Jr., review a few of the more than 200 rolls of film that came through the *Times'* picture desk the day of the presidential election, November 5, 1996. The light table was a fixture in 20th-century picture editing, which was dominated by 35-mm transparent film—whether in black-and-white or color negative, or positive slides. Training the eye to read negatives and slides using an 8x Lupe magnifier was an important part of photojournalism practice and was how most images were selected for publication. (Photo by Julie Newton.)

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